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DEPARTMENT OF NURSING EDUCATION

IN CHARGE OF

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RECONSTRUCTION

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In last month's JOURNAL we reviewed some of the accomplishments of the past year and outlined some of the problems of reconstruction which are facing us at the present time. It was noted that with the increased recognition of nursing work, and with the much wider extension of our duties we are having to meet much heavier obligations and more serious responsibilities, and that our failure to always measure up to these new demands, has brought upon us a good deal of open criticism which we must now frankly face.

The first criticism is that we are not able and have not been able for some years to meet the demand for trained women especially in the public health field, and that present measures are hopelessly inadequate to meet this need. Hundreds of important positions, they tell us, are going begging, and new fields of work which ought to be opened, are lying idle because people cannot be found to do the pioneer work of organizing and developing them. The suggestion is now openly made in several quarters that if we cannot supply a sufficient number of nurses, other types of workers will have to be created by some shorter process to carry on much of this health work.

Another criticism which is frequently made is that nursing does not supply exactly the type of woman desired for building up and developing these newer fields of work. We are told that few nurses have the necessary educational background, that they lack personality and initiative, that they have neither the technical knowledge required nor the social point of view, that they are often timid and lacking in self-confidence and so are not always successful in arousing the necessary enthusiasm and coöperation in the community in which they work.

The system of training is commonly held responsible for all these deficiencies. It is contended that we put too much emphasis on bedside work and too little on scientific and theoretical principles, that much of the practical work in the hospital is of a menial type and entirely uneducational; that our hard and fast system of discipline curbs individuality and makes the nurse an obedient follower but not a leader; that we give too much time to the care of the sick and too little to the social and economic causes of disease and to the preven-

tion of sickness. The most serious feature of much of this criticism is that instead of suggesting modifications of our present system, or methods of releasing our schools from the economic bondage in which they are now held, so that they can build up a more satisfactory training for public health work, some of our critics are assuming that the only remedy is to sweep the old system aside altogether and start afresh with entirely new methods which would possibly result in taking much of this work out of the hands of nurses altogether.

These criticisms are not new—indeed nurses themselves have called attention to many of their own deficiencies long before outsiders recognized them. While a number of doctors have been protesting for years that they did not want educated women in nursing, and while many of those in control of hospitals have opposed every step which has been made to bring in better women and give them better opportunities for training, nurses have been constantly struggling to make them see these newer fields and have been battling away, almost single-handed, in their efforts to prepare themselves better for just these new duties.

The great marvel is not that we should have fallen short of complete success, but that we should have won the unquestioned position we have in these new and difficult fields of work. Whoever may come after us, we have been the pioneers who blazed the trail and showed what could be done. In spite of very evident limitations in personnel and in training, there is no question that nurses have measured up to these new demands on the whole with a finer spirit and a greater measure of success than numberless workers in other fields who have had much larger opportunities. The profession of medicine with which we are quite familiar, has not always kept itself abreast of the social demands of the times, nor has it kept its ranks free from undesirable members who are personally and professionally unfitted for their great responsibility. Indeed one of the most constant complaints of public health nurses is that they cannot get ahead with their educational and preventive work owing to the reactionary attitude of some of the medical men in their communities.

On the whole, it is believed that no profession has as many men or women as it needs, of marked personality and ability and progressive spirit. Nursing has had a number of strong leaders who compare very favorably with those in any other profession, but there is no question that we need many more—women who are not just good, amiable, patient, hard working plodders, but leaders of vision and courage who are forceful, intelligent, and skillful in adapting themselves to new conditions and in securing the interest and coöperation of different types of people.

The great question is how to bring such women into our schools and how to conserve and develop those qualities which make for enlightened and progressive leadership not only in public health work but in all the higher branches of nursing service. Perhaps we have not always welcomed and prized these rare qualities of initiative, courage, enthusiasm, independence, and intelligence, as we should. The student who is naturally amenable and acquiescent, who asks no troublesome questions, and shows no disposition to doubt the absolute wisdom and rightness of things as they are, the person who has no definite or positive aims or ideas of her own and is always willing to accept the opinions and personal dictation of others—such a student is easy to manage and under the conditions of hospital training may seem to be a satisfactory kind of person, but when she gets beyond her period of training and especially when she tries to undertake a new type of work demanding independent judgment, personal force, and original ideas, she is likely to prove a rather weak and ineffective kind of person. Those qualities are not very common in human beings anywhere and they are very easily suppressed so that it is necessary to provide for their fostering and development, just as we provide for the training of our nurses in skill and manual dexterity. Otherwise we shall fail in turning out the kind of product the world is demanding of us. The introduction of student government into many schools is proving an effective measure of developing leadership; training students in coöperation and a wider and fuller personal life will undoubtedly do much also to develop the social qualities and secure freer self-expression for the individual pupil. But the whole point of view of the superintendents and supervisors, teachers, doctors and trustees in many hospitals will have to be changed before we shall get very far in freeing the minds and the spirits of our nurses-in-training from the traditional subservience which has too often been impressed upon them. This is one of the things educated young women find most difficult to tolerate, and it is keeping many excellent women out of our profession. It is time that we should speak plainly on this subject and see what we can do to remedy this condition where it is found.

As far as numbers are concerned, it is not surprising that we should have found it difficult to meet the needs of a new field which has been expanding at such an exceptionally rapid rate. The war has complicated things by making immense demands on the small forces we had already prepared, but with the approaching demobilization, there will be a considerable number of nurses released, many of whom have already some training or experience in public health work, or who are now ready to take such training if some assistance can be

given them in meeting the initial expense. During the war a large number of young women with excellent educational background have entered training schools and quite a large proportion of these are planning to enter public health or educational work. An active recruiting campaign among senior nurses and recent graduates would undoubtedly bring much larger numbers into these newer fields instead of allowing them to drift along the line of least resistance which usually means private duty. No one wishes to minimize the importance of this familiar and respected field of nursing service, but it is unfair to the nurse herself and to the nursing profession to allow any young woman to leave the training school without showing her the undoubtedly wider opportunities for service and for personal advancement which lie in these other fields. We should be zealously searching our schools for all the ambitious and capable young women we can find and urging them to consider these newer and more difficult lines of work. No school which does not send out a fair proportion of its graduates into these positions of public influence and leadership, can ever be considered as a school of high standing, no matter how excellent its record of practical efficiency may be.

As for the system of training, we have long recognized the need for some adjustments which would enable us to meet the special needs of this increasingly large group of pupils interested in public health work—indeed of all pupils. The idea of a brief term of experience and training in public health nursing in the final year had already been introduced in several schools before the war, and has been extended considerably during the past year. It ought to be carried much further, but before we rush ahead into more affiliations we need to build up much better facilities for this type of training, more trained teachers of public health nursing subjects, better supervision in the districts, and better organized work all through. For this we shall have to look to our friends in the public health nursing field. We need also, a rather extensive system of scholarships to enable ambitious young women on small salaries to take special training for such work.

The idea of giving some of the preparatory training for nursing in colleges, has gained considerable headway during the war, and there seems every reason to believe that this will be a distinct step in the direction of better fundamental preparation in the sciences. It ought also to bring into our schools more women of good educational preparation. University affiliation of any type will not take the place, however, of an independent endowment for training schools, which is the most fundamental of all the reforms which we have to accomplish in the field of nursing education. The elimination of unnecessary drudgery and the enriching and condensing of the course of train-

ing have been talked of for a long time, but we seem to be unable to move far in this direction until hospitals are willing to provide more paid helpers for the routine housekeeping duties of the hospital, and probably also, more trained nurses and attendants for certain services which are relatively uneducational to the nurse-in-training. Meantime the non-resident system offers a very hopeful possibility for the enlargement of the pupil-nursing staff and the relief of some of the heavy pressure to which this overworked body is subject in almost every hospital.

The question of hours is the most immediate and urgent of all and is bound up with every problem in nursing education. It is a serious charge against both hospitals and nursing organizations, that we should have allowed so many years to pass since the urgent need for shorter hours in hospitals was first demonstrated, twenty-three years ago. A united effort now to remove this old abuse would probably do more than any other one thing to bring in a new era in nursing.

There is no reason to be discouraged or disheartened about the future. In spite of its defects there is so much that is of tested and proven value in our system of education that it cannot be replaced by any system of theoretical instruction, no matter how short or how attractive. The knowledge of disease in all its phases, the practical experience in observing and handling patients, the discipline of the daily task,—these are the things that have put sinews and spirit into our work, and they cannot be sacrificed without incalculable loss. If we can only get together now and push ahead along the line we know to be most urgent, there is every reason to believe that we can bring about a new order of things without having outsiders step in and do it for us.

The war has wakened us, it has shocked us by some of the things we have discovered in our own ranks, but it has encouraged us, too, because we know now what can be done by organized effort and by wide publicity. There is new blood in our schools to draw upon, we have the interest of a great many men and women outside our schools who will help us, and we have a hospitable attitude toward all kinds of reconstruction, which comes as a result of the war. Let us not be afraid to try experiments, to break through traditions if they are hampering our progress, but do not let us be stampeded into unwise action which may prove to be reaction instead of progress.